

# Thesis Outline

**Socially Engaged Photography**



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# ***I. Introduction***

## **1. Thesis Statement**

In my thesis I want to investigate how Socially Engaged Photography works for people in projects of other artists and in my own practical work.

Socially engaged photography deals with communities and seeks to provide insight into people's lives in collaboration with them. This democratic collaboration focuses on the process of building interpersonal relationships and engaging with people. The photographic work is created through the process. The socially engaged photographer decides to develop his/her project in respectful cooperation and involves the photographed as collaborator in decision-making processes. Also, the audience is viewed as a part of the collaborative process. A socially engaged photographer differentiates between making people the object of the photography project and asking them to become collaborators in their own project.

I want to write about, what socially engaged photography means and what the tools used are. Furthermore, I will analyse two photographic works that made use of socially engaged photography. I will use in my practical project, the concept of socially engaged photography and I will document my experiences with it. Finally, I would like to formulate my results, things I experienced and learning in interviews, from books, talks, discussions and during my own practice, as conclusions.

## **2. Background**

With the camera I can explore my surroundings, understand the world I live in and I hope to be able to communicate through photographs. The camera is a great tool to discover the world, meet new people and hear fascinating stories. It's a way to listen, tell, engage, record, aestheticize, romanticize, critique, empower, change and enjoy (Rovers, 2020, p.7).

To me it appears to be difficult for many people to realize that a photo is often more than what you see at first sight in an image. The reason for this perception is how photos are used nowadays. They should underline the text, show the product or represent a proof.

To me the first step for a different understanding of photography is to consider how a photo is created. To understand that every image is the result of a complex situation. A photograph is the product of an encounter of several protagonists, mainly photographer and photographed, camera and spectator (Azoulay, A. 2008, p. 45). Traditionally photo-shoots are highly authoritarian. Orders are given on how to look, to pose, and how the person should be dressed. To me every aspect of this process needs engagement of the person photographed. In my experience, the photographer can set the tone, he/she is able to give everyone the order what to do, to get the image he/she is imagining.

My decision to work socially engaged developed quickly when I started photographing people, because I noticed an imbalance of power right from the beginning of the photographing process, which I didn't feel comfortable with. To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; objects that can be symbolically possessed (Sontag, 2001, p. 14-15).

My goal always was to make the portrayed person feel as comfortable as possible and to accept every decision of the photographed, e.g. respect the needs for a pause. This often has been difficult for me, because I sometimes then didn't come across as being confident. Thus, it always has been a balancing act between presenting a clear idea/vision on the one hand and involving the people being portrayed on the other hand. Between being goal oriented and being open and imagining how they feel and acting accordingly.

That's why my first project was one about my close friends (title: People of Trust). I asked myself if there is a difference between photographing friends and strangers. I investigated how this inequality in closeness affects the photographic process. The question was therefore: do you first need trust to photograph people and do you see the trust or the difference if you have trust or not with the people in the photos? My idea has been confirmed in this project. Working with people I am friends with is more pleasant for me and for the person portrayed, because people immediately trust each other.

My next project was a collaboration with two fellow students, and was created in 2015 when many refugees arrived to Germany. We held workshops in an asylum center for unaccompanied child refugees in Munich. I didn't take any photos during this project. We organized both digital and analog cameras and made them available to the children. We also did not only do photo

workshops, but also gave print and bookbinding workshops. In this project I did not feel like a photographer. I didn't want to be, because it didn't feel right to photograph the children I worked with. We documented the results of the workshop photographically and wrote about our experiences. This resulted in a little book. I thought the project was very important, but since it was limited in time, it did not satisfy me. We just got to know the children a little bit and it was already over. I would have liked to give more workshops or offer my support for other things. Even though I didn't take pictures I would have liked to continue such a work and I tried to do so later. I think both I and the participants learned something new from these encounters.

For the next month I would like to work with the term of socially engaged photography. I hope to be able to establish a fundamental method for my future projects, too. I'm curious about the experiences I will make and also I am looking forward to dive into texts, essays and presentations related to the subject and to learn and think more about it. I strongly believe in photographs and images to create awareness, to educate on specific topics. By sharing photographic stories people can reflect about their own position. Photographs cannot create a moral position, but they can reinforce one — and can help build a nascent one. (Sontag, 2001, p. 17)

### **3. Possible research questions/plan**

How can I use socially engaged photographic practices in my graduation project?

Why it is important for me to work as a socially engaged photographer when working with people?

Which different ways/tools are being used when working as a socially engaged photographer?

What are the impacts of socially engaged photography?

## **II. Outline (Body of Thesis)**

Chapter 1 Introduction: Why do I find socially-engaged photography important in my practice?

Chapter 2 Analyse two social engaged photography projects  
1. Project: Portraits and Dreams by Wendy Ewald  
2. Project: 44 Irving St by Susan Meiselas

Chapter 3 My own experience by trying to work as a social engaged photographer with a particular focus on my graduation project

Conclusion

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